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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship between a reader's level of moral development and his preferred mode of response to literature. It was prompted by a common concern of high school English teachers: the difficulty experienced by many adolescent readers in responding to the secondary literature curriculum through an interpretive mode. The study hypothesized that adolescent readers operating at the principled level of moral development as tested by James Rest's Determining Issues Test (DIT) would prefer the interpretive mode. Readers at levels below the principled would more frequently choose any of six other modes of response to the same three short stories. Subjects were 74 caucasian, middle-class, adolescent boys from a suburban high school in the San Francisco Bay Area. They completed Rest's DIT and other tests. Test results and respondents' ages and reading abilities were analyzed statistically. The major hypothesis was borne out at the .05 level of significance. The principled thinkers as defined by the DIT significantly more often chose interpretive responses. (Author)

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The Relationship Between Adolescents' Levels of Moral Development and Their Responses to Three Short Stories

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When students reach their adolescence, their concerns increasingly switch from pleasing their teachers, their parents and concentrating on the skills taught in the classroom to pleasing their peers and developing an identity and a facility in what they perceive to be the 'real world.' English teachers and secondary literature curriculum developers have tried to take this into account when choosing selections for high school readers. Historically, literature has been, among other things, a vehicle through which educators have attempted to make students more 'human.' Literature can provide a mirror through which the human race can examine itself and perhaps learn lessons about life unable to be learned in any other way. But, many who have worked with young people know that the effects of literature and even carefully thought out literature programs are often negligible for many students.

However, until recently, it has been extremely difficult for researchers to look at both the cognitive and affective aspects of response to literature at the same time. In much of the previous research, either reading

ability or emotional components were looked at in one way or another but rarely, if ever, together. Nevertheless, when one of the two components was missing, it became apparent that the full impact of the reading program was diluted. On the other hand, developmental theory has much to say about the growth of the child's abilities to function at various levels in a variety of environments and situations, and moral development theory, in particular, offers an additional tool to the researcher attempting to look at cognitive abilities from a new perspective. Precisely, it is the interaction between an adolescent reader's level of moral development and response to literature that this study examines.

Previous response to literature research has identified six inclusive modes of response. The most common, and usually the most desired, is the interpretive mode. In adolescent readers, one can expect this kind of response approximately 40% to 60% of the time. The other modes, none expected more than 20% of the time include narrative, when the reader retells the story without attempting to derive meaning; associational, when the reader relates an aspect of the story to an irrelevant past experience; prescriptive, when the reader blames a character for an outcome without attempting to understand motivation; literary judgment, when the reader disregards intent and only

remarks on his/her opinion of the story's quality; self-involvement, when a reader overempathizes with a character and disregards other aspects of the work, and miscellaneous which occurs less than 2% of the time. Interestingly, the preferred mode of literary response is not highly correlated with I.Q., sex, reading ability, etc. (Squire, 1964; Wilson, 1963).

It is this author's contention that some of the skills demanded for properly grasping the concepts and intents of literature are the same skills which correspond to different stages of moral development. As Kohlberg emphasizes, each developmental stage is qualitatively different from each previous stage (Kohlberg, 1973). It is not that the developmental process is simply cumulative, but that it represents a structural change in the individual's problem-solving strategies and offers that individual a different way of looking at his/her world. Therefore, this study was designed to examine whether the qualitatively different perspective of students operating at the highest level of moral development, that is, the Post-conventional, would help them to approach short stories through the interpretive mode.

Method

To research this question, I tested in six secondary English classrooms in a public high school in the San Francisco Bay Area in spring of 1977. The school is located in an upper-middle-class suburb with very few minority families. For this study, I limited the analysis to white, male students to limit the number of variables to be considered. Altogether, I ended up with complete protocols for 94 subjects, ages 14 through 18.

To test for the students' levels of moral development, a group test developed by James Rest at the University of Minnesota was administered. This test, the Determining Issues Test or DIT includes six Kohlbergian moral dilemmas each followed by twelve statements--two representing each stage of moral development. However, since when presented with logical arguments, persons will often prefer a statement one stage above their operational stage, on the DIT, stage one responses are eliminated. Instead, nonsensical statements are included to see if respondents are trying to score 'high' by choosing what sound like the most sophisticated answers. Additionally, Rest includes some 'Anti-establishment' responses. Although these are disregarded in stage-typing, Rest sees them as evidence of a transition between stages four and five. (Rest, 1972)

After the student has reacted on paper to each state-

ment from strongly agree to strongly disagree or don't understand, he then ranks the four statements which best describe his preferences for solving the moral dilemma. Since there are great differences between the interview technique used by Kohlberg and forced-choice measures, Rest suggests against stage-typing. Instead, his measure allows the researcher to arrive at a 'P' or Principled score. This score is the percentage of a respondent's preferences for statements representing Post-Conventional thinking.

A week after testing the students' levels of moral development, I randomly gave them three short stories which they simultaneously read and heard on tape. After each story, the students were given a response sheet of 12 items that they ranked from most descriptive to not at all descriptive pertaining to their initial reactions to each story. Of the 12 statements, two represented each mode of literary response with the exception of miscellaneous which was used for cases of no response to a particular item. Then participants chose and ranked the three statements that best described their reactions. These rankings were analyzed to arrive at an 'I' score (Interpretive). Any student with a weighted score of ten (10) of a possible fifteen (15) was classified as an interpreter.

Following this, participants were asked to answer four questions: What was the story about? Who did they like the

most and least of the characters in the story? What were their reasons for their preferences? These responses were analyzed as units of thought and related to the students' preferred mode of response and level of moral development. Finally, after all the stories had been completed, the participants were asked to rank their three favorite characters.

The stories, "The Young Man and the Mouse" by William Saroyan (Saroyan, 1958); "After Twenty Years" by O'Henry (1906); "All the Years of Her Life" by Morley Callaghan (1936), all had central male characters, presented a moral dilemma, and provided a number of perspectives on loyalty, the law, and property.

Results

As shown on the following table, some significant results were found. Using a chi-square test, it was verified that readers operating at the principled level of moral development did, in this sample, choose the interpretive mode of response more frequently than students at lower levels at the .05 level of statistical significance. Furthermore, the lower the raw 'P' score, the smaller the percentage of interpretive responses.

Insert Table about here

A second area of reader response which provided interest was whether students would choose as their preferred character those who seemed most like the reader. Although there was no apparent relationship between level of moral development and character preference, regardless of 'P', three-quarters of all the respondents chose as their favorite, a character which had been betrayed or victimized as opposed to a character than had not. However, the three characters most chosen were also most unlike the readers. One was a mouse; one was a middle-aged woman; one was a notorious gangster. One of the findings of previous response to literature studies is that students, especially boys, prefer reading about characters like themselves. (Loban, 1954). In this study, students at all reading levels overwhelmingly identified the mouse, woman, and gangster to be "least like themselves," albeit on superficial criteria, but chose them as their favorites.

Finally, reading level did not correlate with 'I' or highly with 'P'. And, the numbers of free responses did not correlate with 'P' or highly with 'I'.

Discussion

The implications of this study could be of use to both researchers and practitioners. First, ways of looking at moral development on a group basis rather than an individual basis need to be refined. As is true with any paper and

pencil measure, respondents are limited by their reading and "test-taking" abilities. Furthermore, if this sample is an indication, the group means were the same as Rest's statistically, but the means within the sample were different which is why principled thinkers were those scoring .40 instead of Rest's suggested .45.

Second, educators need to recognize that not only does the literary selection bring something to the reader, but that the reader brings something to the work. (Rosenblatt, 1971). Not only does the reader contribute his/her decoding, encoding, comprehension skills, experiences, preferences, attitudes and values, but also, certain problem-solving skills heretofore unexamined--that is, those skills correlating to a student's level and stage of moral development. If, after replication, we find this to be true, both literature curriculum developers and classroom teachers can take these variables into account when making decisions about what to introduce to a class and how to organize instruction. This is not to say that teachers should become involved in evaluating and typing their students, but that educators need to be aware of an additional, significant aspect of human thinking--moral development--before making assumptions about the appropriateness of materials. For example, it may be, as has been indicated by the present study, that the addition of moral questions broadens a

story's appeal to a wider variety of student reading abilities. Or, with further research, we may learn that selections with a moral dilemma inhibit interpretive responses. If nothing else, teachers must ask themselves if perhaps a student's difficulty with a selection is a function of yet to be developed skills in problem-solving rather than an inability to correctly comprehend the purpose of a piece of literature. Clearly, more research is needed on all these questions.

In conclusion, it seems evident that a relationship exists between an adolescent boy's level of moral development and his preferred mode of literary response. Those students with sophisticated strategies for approaching moral dilemmas also, more frequently, chose to approach literature through interpretation.

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Table

Number of Respondents	Raw 'P' Score Range	% of Interpretive Responses
30	less than .26	21%
34	between .26 and .40	37%
10	.40 or greater	60%
74	'P' = 10	'I' = 24